

## postal services

A postal service is responsible for the collection and distribution of the mail. It is financed largely through the sale of postage stamps to those who use its services and by various other fees. In almost every country the postal service is operated, and often subsidized, by the government. In the United States, however, the U.S. Postal Service, which was established under the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, is an independent, nonprofit corporation.

## ORIGINS

In the ancient world the establishment of governments that ruled over widespread areas and the development of trade necessitated the setting up of message-carrying systems. As early as the 2d millennium BC in Egypt and the 1st millennium in China, relay systems were developed using messengers on horseback and relay stations situated on major roads. These systems were at first reserved for government correspondence, but commercial interests were soon allowed to participate and, in time, so was the private sector.

### The Persian Model

The Persians inaugurated a postal service under Cyrus the Great (d. 529 BC) that still ranks as a major achievement. The Greek historian Herodotus enumerated 111 relay stations for mounted couriers on the Sardis-Susa road alone, a route of about 2,575 km (1,600 mi). The Romans patterned their postal organization on the Persian model. They created an extensive highway system to facilitate troop movements, travel, trade, and communications. Papyrus, parchment, and wax tablets were used for correspondence. Postal relay stations were large and numerous. Although government posts carried only official letters, commercial posting companies served merchants and other citizens. Fifty to 80 km (30 to 50 mi) per day were covered by the average daily post, and 160 km (100 mi) per day by occasional express riders. After Rome's central authority collapsed, however, reliable posts in western Europe virtually disappeared.

### Renaissance Postal Systems

The introduction of paper just prior to the advent of the Renaissance in western Europe sparked a boom in official, commercial, ecclesiastical, and private correspondence. This sharp increase made it necessary for monarchical authorities to rehabilitate and extend the postal systems originally set up by the Romans.

The University of Paris established one of the first postal services in western Europe. Under the protection of the crown, from the 13th century until the end of the 18th, the service carried letters and money between students at the university and parents throughout France. In 1477 the French king Louis XI established a nationwide network of relay stations serviced by mounted couriers. England opened a similar service in 1481, and many of the Italian and German city-states followed suit. These government services operated in addition to private services. Among the oldest of the private systems was that begun in 1450 by the Thurn and Taxis families of Venice for the Holy Roman Empire; it was, in effect, a franchise financed by an annual fee. By the 19th century, however, the practice of granting royal franchises had been discontinued in favor of royal monopolies whose revenues went directly to the crown.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA

Early colonial mail service was irregular, haphazard, and for the most part in private hands. For a fee of one penny, colonists in seaport towns could post letters to relatives abroad with the captains of merchant ships. Incoming mail from Europe was left at seaport taverns and coffeehouses for pickup. Civil administration and military letters and documents were entrusted to the captains of naval vessels.

The first attempt to regulate foreign mail was made in 1639, when the General Court of Massachusetts enacted an ordinance designating Richard Fairbanks's tavern in Boston as the official repository for overseas mail. Similar enactments were made in Virginia (1657) and New Amsterdam (1660). The governor of New York at that time, Francis Lovelace, established an overland postal service between New York and Boston in 1672. It was the first intercity service in colonial America, and similar services soon opened in the Connecticut and Pennsylvania regions.

Rapid increases in population and in commercial activity generated an increasing demand for postal services. In 1693 mounted courier service was instituted between Portsmouth, N.H., and Philadelphia. Posts were extended to Annapolis, Md. (1727), Williamsburg, Va. (1732), and Montreal and Quebec (both in 1763).



## The Administration of Benjamin Franklin

After serving as Philadelphia's postmaster from 1737, Benjamin Franklin was appointed deputy postmaster general for America in 1753. Franklin made many fundamental improvements in the colonial postal services. He conducted periodic inspection tours, made new surveys, and mapped shorter routes for faster deliveries between stations. He introduced the use of stagecoaches as mail carriers, milestone main routes, scheduled runs by night between Philadelphia and New York, and arranged more frequent and faster services between Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. In 1755, a packet service was launched from England to New York and another from Falmouth to Charleston, providing the southern colonies with their first direct postal connection with London. By the time he was discharged from office in 1774, Franklin had established post roads from Maine to Florida and from New York to Canada, where in 1763 he had set up postal services at Quebec, Trois-Rivieres, and Montreal; and mail between North America and England was being delivered on a regular schedule.

On July 26, 1775, Benjamin Franklin was appointed postmaster general by the Continental Congress. He served in this capacity until Nov. 7, 1776, when his talents were needed elsewhere.

## The U.S. Postal System

The Constitution of 1789 mandated the establishment of post offices and post roads. Congress made the U.S. Post Office an organ of the federal government, and the first postmaster general, Samuel Osgood of Massachusetts, was appointed by President George Washington in 1789. When Osgood took office, the 13 states had only about 75 post offices and 3,900 km (2,400 mi) of post roads. Within a decade both numbers had quintupled, as had postal revenues.

As lands to the south and west were settled, interior postal communications became costly and difficult to maintain. Settlers frequently petitioned Congress for new mail service, and the growing political importance of the posts became apparent when Andrew Jackson made (1829) the postmaster general a member of the cabinet. Postmasterships and related positions became patronage positions and were parceled out to loyal party followers.

Rates of postage—except for newspapers—had always been high. Postage for a single-sheet letter sent more than 650 km (400 mi), for example, was 25 cents (1816-45). Letter carriers earned no salaries but were paid 2 cents by the recipients for each letter they delivered. In the populous East, private letter companies began challenging the federal postal monopoly in the 1830s and '40s by providing low-cost service within and between cities.

## Rowland Hill's Postal Reforms

The English educator Rowland Hill published his recommendations for post office reform in 1837. Among his innovative ideas were the ending of postage charges based on the distance letters traveled, the establishment of a uniform postage rate, and the prepayment of postage through the sale of adhesive-backed stamps sold at post offices (see PHILATELY). Hill's recommendation for the basic letter rate was one penny for each half-ounce (the average charge for letters was sixpence). Hill's reforms were adopted in England in 1840. The U.S. Congress authorized the use of adhesive postage stamps in 1847 and gradually adopted other Hill-authored reforms.

## The Growth of the Postal System

The reduction of postal rates in the United States (by 1863, letter rates had shrunk to 3 cents per half-ounce) and the gradual broadening of service allowed the federal postal monopoly to grow, and by the time of the Civil War, most private posts were closed. The California Gold Rush (1849) precipitated an immediate need for transcontinental mails. Steamships provided service by way of Panama; improved overland coach routes reduced transcontinental transit to 20 days. The Pony Express (1860-61)—a private venture—offered 10- to 6-day horse courier service between Saint Joseph and San Francisco. The transcontinental railroad (1869) provided 7-day mails between New York and San Francisco.

Established in 1863, the Railway Mail Service remained the most valued postal innovation until shortly after World War II. Day and night mails were sorted, picked up, and dropped off by clerks in special postal cars while trains sped between thousands of towns, greatly reducing sorting work in large post offices. By 1889 special trains moved transcontinental mails in 109 hours.

Rural Free Delivery became permanent in 1896 on a nationwide basis. By 1915 numerous automobiles in RFD

service facilitated extensions of rural routes, which by 1920 numbered 43,445. Largely in response to farmers' demands, a national parcel-post service was begun in 1913.

Canceling machines (1876), mechanical sorting devices (1907 and 1915), and underground pneumatic tubes (1893-1953) were introduced in various U.S. cities to speed mail distribution. Airmail was first tried in 1911. By 1924 the New York-San Francisco air route was regularly flown in 34 hours (westbound). After World War II the rapid expansion of airmail service and the reduction of railway mail service drastically changed mail transportation in the United States.

New postal facilities serving an urbanized American society without railroads proved extremely costly. With virtually no mail sorted in transit, burdens in fixed post offices mounted. ZIP codes (introduced 1963) became adjuncts to key-punch sorting machines and automatic address-reading machines. Package-handling machines (1959) and conveyor systems (c.1907) were greatly improved in the 1960s. A fully automated post office opened at Providence, R.I., in 1960, heralding the new look of the mechanized postal system.

#### Postal Reorganization Act of 1970

On Aug. 12, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon signed into law the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, which changed the federal Post Office Department into the U.S. Postal Service, an independent agency within the executive branch. Its purpose was to enhance the self-financing potentialities of the postal service, to increase its efficiency, to reduce the public tax burden, and to remove the service from political control. The service often operated at a deficit, however. There were some years in the early 1980s that had surpluses, but later in the decade, despite postage rate hikes in 1985 and 1988, there were deficits. Labor costs accounted for about 85% of the service's operating budget. Suggestions for easing the financial crisis included "privatizing" the USPS. (Private carriers already have taken over many delivery routes, and private parcel delivery is widespread.) By 1988, faced with finding ways to help cut the overall federal deficit, the USPS cut back on some services. In 1989 the government returned the USPS to the off-budget status it had enjoyed prior to 1985, a move that would insulate the service from further deficit-reduction efforts. Nonetheless, in 1990 the USPS sought another rate increase.

#### NEW POSTAL SERVICE TECHNOLOGY

Recognizing that the utilization of electronic automation could help contain rising costs while helping to meet increasing public demands for faster delivery services at reasonable rates, the U.S. Postal Service is conducting feasibility studies on available technologies. To pave the way for such improvements, it developed the "ZIP + 4," the nine-digit code system that began with congressional authorization, in October 1983. By the late 1980s only about 15% of mailings used the nine-digit code, and the USPS was criticized for promoting the code before having the equipment to process such mail.

Carl Scheele

Bibliography: Braake, Alex L., et al., eds. *The Posted Letter in Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1628-1790* (1975); Clinton, A., *The Post Office Worker* (1984); Conkey, Kathleen, *The Postal Precipice: Can the U.S. Postal Service Be Saved?* (1983); Fleishman, Joel L., *The Future of the Postal Service* (1983); Fuller, Wayne E., *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (1972; repr. 1980) and *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America* (1964); Hafen, LeRoy R., *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869: Promoter of Settlement, Precursor of Railroads* (1926; repr. 1977); Hargest, George E., *History of Letter Post Communication Between the United States and Europe, 1845-1875* (1975); Harlow, Alvin F., *Old Post Bags: The Story of the Sending of a Letter in Ancient and Modern Times* (1928); Kay, F. George, *Royal Mail: The Story of the Posts in England From the Time of Edward IV to the Present Day* (1951); McAfee, Cheryl W., *The U.S. Postal Service* (1987); Nevin, David, *The Expressman* (1974); Rich, Wesley Everett, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (1924; repr. 1977); Scheele, Carl H., *A Short History of the Mail Service* (1970) and, with Constance Minkin, *Neither Snow nor Rain...The Story of the United States Mails* (1970); Staff, Frank, *The Transatlantic Mail* (1956).